







# Heaven THE HARD WAY



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By Veda Neville Conner

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My mother little dreamed in her sedate, gas-lit, coal-ranged comfort of how her young contemporaries out in Belen, Territory of New Mexico, would have sniffed at calling that a catastrophe. Theirs was a frontier town in the Rio Grande Valley, and though its name might be Spanish for Bethlehem, their struggles were such that it often seemed a pretty unholy place.

In their isolation, church women of the Territory were at least fifty years behind their eastern sisters, and Billy Sunday himself was only a distant rumor to them.

They were more concerned with some student-preacher at hand and how to pay him and build a church for him to preach in. And at a time when it hadn't rained on the corn or cattle for two years.

They coped with 100-miles-an-hour dust storms or blizzards fresh and strong from the Rockies on their nights of long-planned festivities. They knew raucous cowboys, tough railroad builders, puzzling Indians, bad gunmen. And there were the big, important, heart-wearying things: piñon wood cut too long for balky church cookstoves, canned milk that froze, kerosene lamps that smoked. And they'd have given it all up as quickly as they'd have given up their hope of Heaven.

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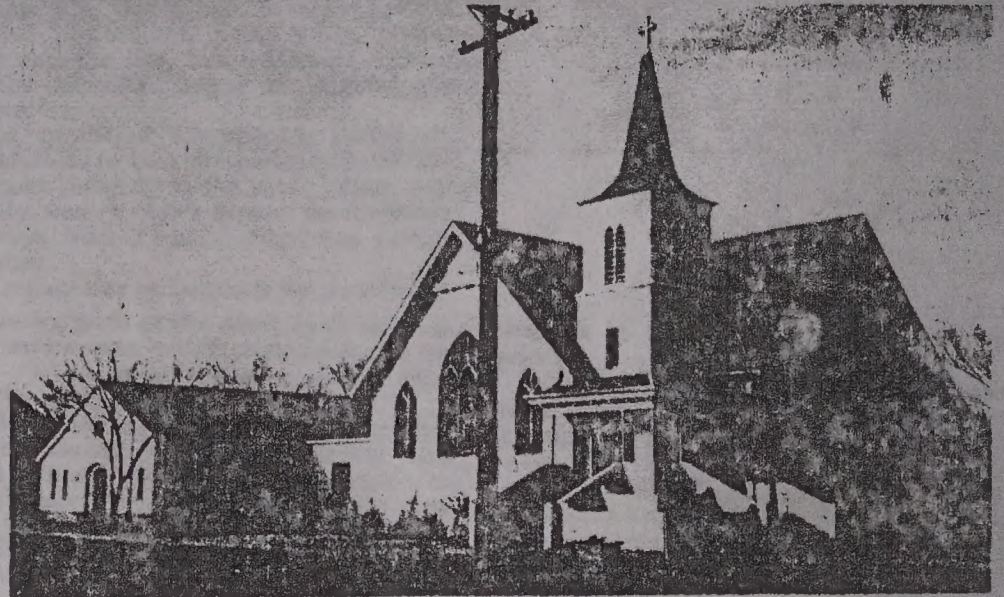
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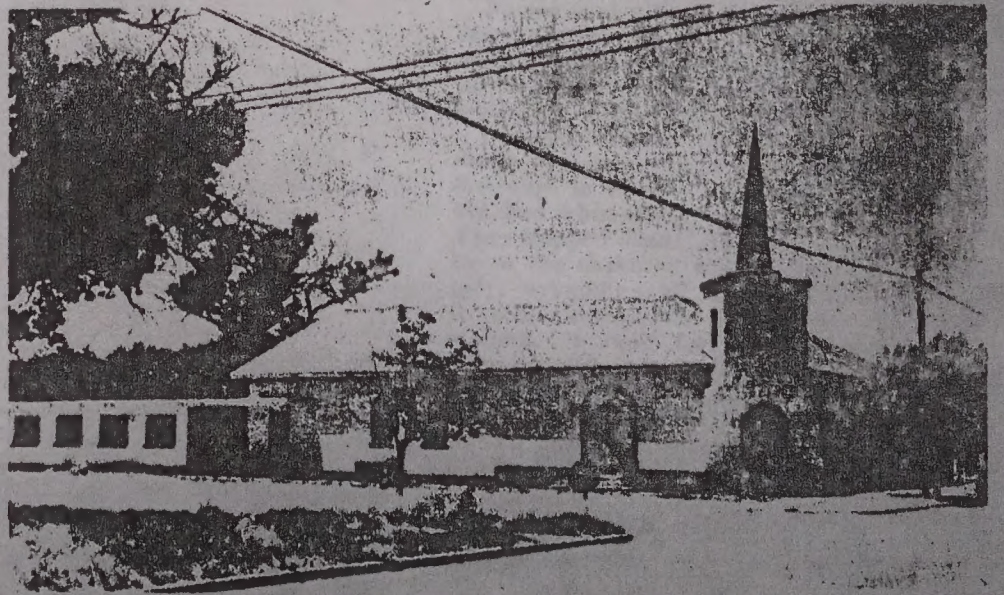
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The Belen Lutheran ladies, like the Methodists, managed to have church activities before they ever had a church. Services were being held in 1885, and their church was built in 1894. Also like the Methodists, they had a night when the cut-off figured largely in a church supper. But their dilemma was the reverse—with not enough customers and too many oysters.

This supper was an annual affair and one of the biggest events of the social season for Belen and surrounding Rio Grande country—and a shot in the arm of about \$200 to the ladies' strong box.

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An east wind from the Manzanos was already beginning a mournful howl and specks of snow were dotting the grey February sky when Mrs. Laura Becker, president, and Mrs. Clara Dalies, secretary, and their Ladies' Aid began carrying supplies into the Heyday Club building. Their adobe church was far too small for such an affair. They lugged dozens of oil lamps, water, piñon wood, silver, bowls and soup kettles, pounds of dime-sized oyster crackers, cans of condensed milk.

By the time all was in, long skirts and petticoats had to be wrung out and flapped dry by the hot stove. For the wind, beating across the sand flats and around the mesas of unprotected Belen, carried a freezing mixture of sand and snow.

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He'd also seen the Belen Lutheran Church built in 1894 with adobe blocks for seats. It was a school also, and church ladies, like the pupils, brought their loads of wood for the stove when they held meetings or other affairs, carried out ashes, and swept out the place. Reverend Mathieson, Presbyterian circuit-rider of the Rio Grande Valley, included this Lutheran Church in his preaching itinerary.

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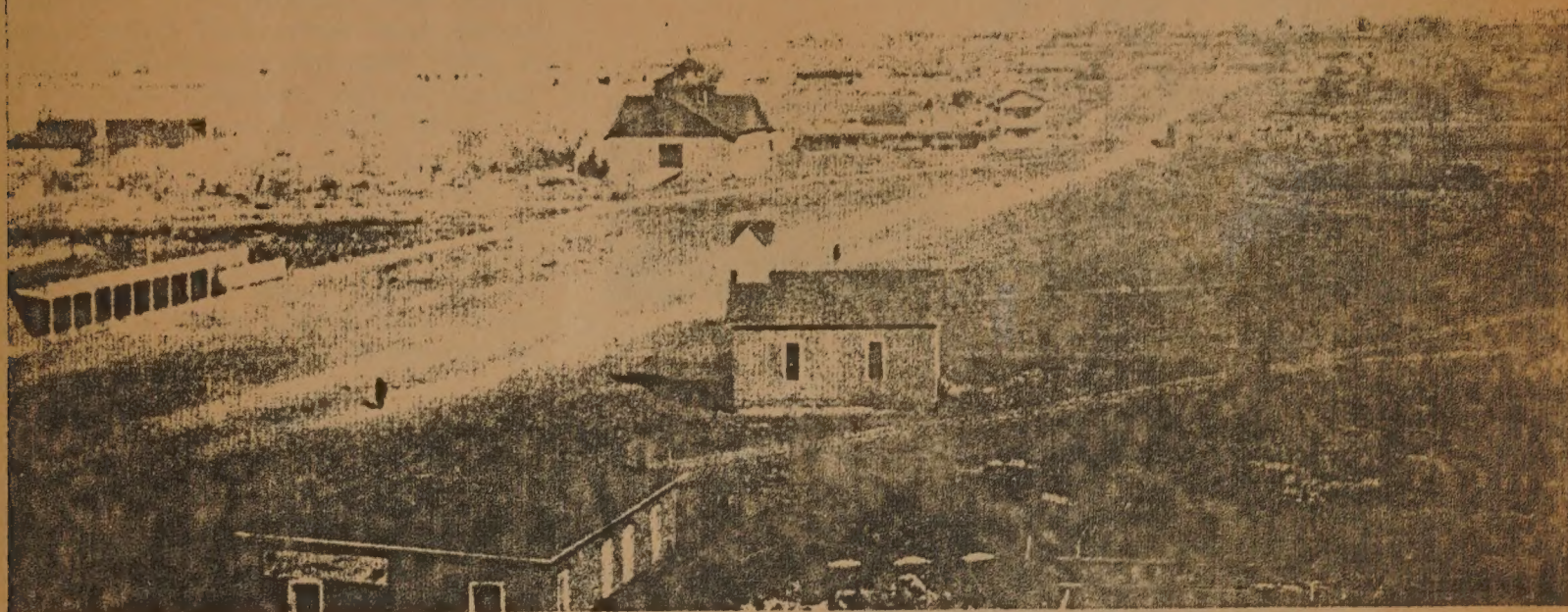
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Becker, Laura  
Dailies, Clara



